

Message Text

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PAGE 01 DAMASC 01228 01 OF 02 021813Z
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INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
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USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
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AMCONSUL JERUSALEM IMMEDIATE
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY LONDON
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 1228

EXDIS

JERUSALEM FOR ATHERTON

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PEPR SY EG IS XF
SUBJECT: SYRIAN CAMPAIGN TO CORRECT "DISEQUILIBRIUM" - PROGRESS
REPORT

SUMMARY: ASSAD HAS SUCCEEDED RELATIVELY WELL DURING PAST
THREE MONTHS IN COPING WITH WHAT HE HAS TERMED THE "DIS-
EQUILIBRIUM" CREATED BY SADAT'S INITIATIVES. HE HAS
SECURED HIS SHORT TERM AIMS: TO AVOID SYRIA'S ISOLATION
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IN THE ARAB EAST AND TO BLOCK SADAT'S EFFORTS TO GAIN
ARAB BACKING FOR HIS NEGOTIATIONS. IN THE PROCESS
SYRIA HAS PICKED UP ENHANCED SOVIET SUPPORT AND LIBYAN
FINANCING. THE ONLY IMMINENT DANGER FACING DAMASCUS IS
RENEWED CIVIL WAR IN LEBANON WHERE SYRIA HAS COURTED THE PLO
AND DOGGEDLY PURSUED A TACTIC OF FIRMNESS TEMPERED BY RESTRAINT
IN COPING WITH SUCCESSIVE INCIDENTS INVOLVING ITS TROOPS. SYRIA

HAS YET TO REVEAL IF IT HAS AN OVERALL STRATEGY TO SOLVE THE LEBANESE CRISIS. DAMASCUS CONTINUES SHARPLY CRITICAL OF US SUPPORT FOR SADAT BUT THIS PUBLIC STANCE HAS NOT YET AFFECTED OUR DAY-TO-DAY RELATIONS. ASSAD'S REFUSAL TO RECEIVE ATHERTON HOWEVER, SUGGESTS SOME UNCERTAINTY IN PRESIDENT'S MIND OVER WHETHER THE SYRIAN IMAGE OF "STEADFASTNESS" IS PERSUASIVE ENOUGH TO HIS PARTNERS. STEADFASTNESS, NONETHELESS, IS THE IMAGE DAMASCUS WILL CULTIVATE FOR THE NEAR TERM IN EXPECTATION THAT SADAT'S INITIATIVES FOR A COMPREHENSIVE SETTLEMENT WILL COLLAPSE AND A NEW EGYPTIAN LEADERSHIP WILL EMERGE. WE SEE NO EVIDENCE SYRIA HAS THOUGHT THROUGH WHAT PEACE PROSPECTS WILL BE IN THOSE EVENTS. END SUMMARY

1. IN HIS MID-DECEMBER MEETING WITH THE SECRETARY, ASSAD SPOKE DISJOINTEDLY AND DELPHICALLY ABOUT THE NEED TO RESTORE AN AREA "EQUILIBRIUM" WHICH HE ARGUED HAD BEEN SERIOUSLY UPSET BY THE SADAT INITIATIVE. HE WAS UNCLEAR, PERHAPS BECAUSE HE HAD NOT MADE UP HIS OWN MIND, ABOUT THE ROLE HE SAW SYRIA PLAYING IN RESTORING EQUILIBRIUM, MUCH LESS IN THE LONGER TERM PEACE PROCESS. HE WAS SIMILARLY VAGUE IN HIS JANUARY 4 INTERVIEW WITH NEWSWEEK EDITOR DE BORCHGRAVE. NOW THAT THREE MONTHS HAVE PASSED SINCE SADAT'S JERUSALEM VISIT, IT IS A BIT EASIER TO DISCERN SYRIAN INTENTIONS, WHAT ASSAD MEANS BY "DISEQUILIBRIUM," AND ON THIS BASIS TRY TO PREDICT WHAT HE STILL MAY TRY TO DO IF HE IS ATTAIN HIS GOAL.

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OUR READING IS THAT HIS IMMEDIATE AIMS HAVE BEEN TO AVOID SYRIA'S ISOLATION IN THE ARAB EAST AND TO BLOCK SADAT'S EFFORTS TO WIN ARAB BACKING FOR HIS NEGOTIATIONS. HE HAS BEEN RELATIVELY SUCCESSFUL ON BOTH SCORES BY EMPLOYING A VARIETY OF APPROACHES -- SOLICITING SOVIET SUPPORT FOR THE "STEADFASTNESS" LINE, PUTTING SYRIAN PRESSURE ON ARAB MODERATES, AND CONTINUING A FIRM BUT RESTRAINED HANDLING OF THE LEBANESE CRISIS. IF OUR ASSESSMENT IS CORRECT, IT MAY EXPLAIN WHY THE SYRIAN LEADERSHIP IS ACTING TODAY WITH MORE SELF-CONFIDENCE THAN IT DID IN DECEMBER-JANUARY AND FOR THE MOMENT SEEMS CONTENT TO STAND BY IN EXPECTATION OF SADAT'S EARLY FAILURE.

2. THE SOVIET CARD - ASSAD'S FIRST ACT IN RESPONSE TO THE JERUSALEM VISIT WAS SENDING FONMIN KHADDAM TO MOSCOW IN LATE NOVEMBER TO PROBE THE EXTENT OF SOVIET READINESS TO OPPOSE SADAT AND SUPPORT COUNTER MOVES. THREE WEEKS LATER HE DISPATCHED CHIEF OF STAFF SHIHABI TO DISCUSS NEW ARMS, THE ONLY SPECIFIC ITEM PUBLICIZED BEING A NEW AIR DEFENSE SYSTEM. A SOVIET MILITARY MISSION REPORTEDLY VISITED SYRIA IN JANUARY AND ASSAD'S OWN FEBRUARY VISIT TO MOSCOW FOLLOWED. NOW HE HAS SENT SHIHABI A SECOND TIME.

ACCOMPANIED BY A SENIOR
MILITARY DELEGATION, PRESUMABLY TO NAIL DOWN DETAILS OF
WEAPONRY AGREED UPON AND TO NEGOTIATE DELIVERY DATES AND
PAYMENT SCHEDULES.

3. ON THE POLITICAL LEVEL, ASSAD SECURED FROM MOSCOW WARM
SOVIET ENDORSEMENT OF SYRIAN OPPOSITION TO SADAT'S
INITIATIVES AND CONVINCED THE SOVIETS TO EXCLUDE FROM
THE FINAL COMMUNIQUE MENTION OF THE GENEVA CONFERENCE
AS EVEN THE EVENTUAL GOAL OF THE PEACE PROCESS. KHADDAM
HAS PUBLICLY STRESSED SYRIA'S DETERMINATION TO ARM
SUFFICIENTLY IN ORDER TO REDRESS THE "STRATEGIC BALANCE,"
IMPLYING THAT DAMASCUS WOULD BE ABLE ON ITS OWN MILITARILY
TO FACE DOWN ISRAEL. WE READ THE FOREIGN MINISTER'S
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RHETORIC MORE AS A FUNDRAISING DEVICE THAN A SERIOUS GOAL
REFLECTING THE CONSENSUS OF SYRIA'S REALISTIC AND CAUTIOUS
MILITARY LEADERS. WHILE ASSAD MAY SEE IT AS A USEFUL
MORALE BOOST TO TALK THIS WAY TO HIS ARMED FORCES, WE
DO NOT BELIEVE THE PRESIDENT SERIOUSLY ENVISAGES
THAT HIS COUNTRY ALONE COULD EVER MILITARILY BE A MATCH
FOR ISRAEL. HOW MUCH NEW SOVIET WEAPONRY WILL BE
FORTHCOMING IS STILL UNKNOWN BUT SIGNALS ARE THAT THE
SOVIETS ARE PREPARED FOR A SPECIAL EFFORT TO BE RESPONSIVE,
ALTHOUGH SYRIAN ABSORPTIVE CAPACITY WILL BE A CONSIDERATION.
WE ASSUME LIBYA WILL PICK UP THE MAJOR PART OF THE TAB
INVOLVED, BUT THE AMOUNT QADHAFI HAS PLEDGED IS ALSO
UNKNOWN. (ESTIMATES RANGE FROM A LOW OF \$200 MILLION
UP TO \$1 BILLION.)

4. STEADFASTNESS PAYS - IF THE PRIMARY REASON FOR SYRIA'S
BITTERNESS ABOUT SADAT'S INITIATIVE WAS CONVICTION HE HAD
DESTROYED THE ARAB NEGOTIATING POSITION, IT WAS REINFORCED BY
CONCERN SYRIA MIGHT BE FORCED TO ABANDON ALL OTHER POLICY
OPTIONS AND CHOOSE BETWEEN FOLLOWING EITHER THE REJECTIONISTS
OR EGYPT. TO DATE, ASSAD HAS AVOIDED HAVING TO CHOOSE.
REINFORCED BY HIS CONVICTION THAT ISRAEL WOULD NOT
RESPOND POSITIVELY ENOUGH TO SADAT, ASSAD USED THE TRIPOLI
AND ALGIERS CONFERENCES TO PROTECT SYRIA'S OPTIONS. WE KNOW
THAT AT TRIPOLI HE SPOKE PERSUASIVELY OF THE CLEAR DANGER
TO SYRIA SHOULD HE ADOPT A POSTURE SO CHALLENGING TO
ISRAEL. IN THE END, HE BROUGHT ABOUT BAGHDAD'S ISOLATION,
NOT HIS OWN.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 DAMASCUS 1228

EXDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (TEXT PARA 5)

JERUSALEM FOR ATHERTON

AT THE SAME TIME, ASSAD HAS SHOWN NO INTENTION TO RISK
LOSING OR WEAKENING HIS TIES WITH CONSERVATIVE ARAB
STATES WHICH HE SEES AS USEFUL SOURCES FOR ECONOMIC
ASSISTANCE AND, PROBABLY MORE IMPORTANTLY, FOR THE
INFLUENCE THEY, PARTICULARLY SAUDI ARABIA, CAN BRING TO
THE PEACE PROCESS.

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5. THE LEBANESE CRISIS AND PALESTINIAN INFLUENCE -
SYRIA FACES NO DANGER MORE EVIDENT OR IMMINENT THEN
RENEWED CIVIL WAR IN LEBANON WHERE THE PIVOTAL PALESTINIAN
ROLE IS COMPLICATING ALL EFFORTS AT SOLUTION. SYRIANS
WERE CONVINCED (AND STILL ARE) THAT TO FOLLOW SADAT WOULD

CONFRONT THEM WITH HAVING TO MAKE UNACCEPTABLE COMPROMISES. OVER PALESTINIAN ISSUES. ASKED "UNACCEPTABLE TO WHOM?", KHADDAM HAS EVASIVELY TOLD US HE WAS REFERRING TO SYRIAN PUBLIC OPINION. THIS EXPLANATION IS LICK AND MISLEADING SINCE THE ONLY DOMESTIC CONSTITUENCIES TO WHICH THE PRESIDENT IS SERIOUSLY ATTENTIVE ARE THE BAAT PARTY AND THE SYRIAN MILITARY. AVAILABLE EVIDENCE INDICATES THE MILITARY CONTINUES LOYAL TO ASSAD AND RESPONSIVE TO HIS LEADERSHIP. THE PARTY, AFTER ASSAD'S FEBRUARY 8 ELECTION "VICTORY", IS IN NO POSITION TO CHALLENGE HIM ON LEBANON UNLESS SYRIAN CASUALTIES RISE DRAMATICALLY. (THE SAME DEVELOPMENT COULD ALSO AFFECT ARMY VIEWS.)

6. WITH NEITHER THE ARMY NOR THE PARTY POSING AN INTERNAL THREAT, WE BELIEVE ASSAD'S APPRECIATION OF POTENTIAL DANGERS TO SYRIAN INTERESTS IN LEBANON ARE DETERMINING HIS CURRENT POSTURE. THE SHTAURA AGREEMENT WAS AN INSTANT VICTIM OF SADAT'S INITIATIVES SINCE ASSAD REALIZED HE HAD A NEW OPENING TO CURRY FAVOR WITH THE PLO AND TO PROFIT FROM THIS HE COULD NOT AFFORD TO EXERT THE MAJOR PRESSURES ON THAT ORGANIZATION WHICH WOULD HAVE BEEN REQUIRED TO BRING ABOUT PULLBACK OF GUERRILLAS FROM THE IMMEDIATE BORDER AREA. ASSAD, FURTHERMORE, HAS AT THIS TIME NO INTEREST IN THE PREDICTABLE SPLINTERING OF THE PLO WHICH HAS PRESSURE FOR WITHDRAWAL WOULD HAVE CREATED. THE EMERGENCE OF FACTIONS OPENLY PRO-SADAT, PRO-HABASH, ETC. WOULD BE A DEVELOPMENT WHICH COULD ONLY WEAKEN SYRIA'S CONTROL OVER THE PLO AND THEREBY COMPLICATE
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ASSAD'S TASK OF CONTROLLING THE COURSE OF EVENTS IN LEBANON.

7. RELIABLE SOURCES TELL US THAT NAJI JAMIL, WHO IS THE PRINCIPAL SYRIAN MILITARY FIGURE INVOLVED IN ALL DISCUSSIONS ABOUT THE LEBANON, IS FATALISTICALLY RESIGNED TO HAVING TO PUT DOWN A SERIES OF BRUSHFIRES. JAMIL PROFESSES ALSO TO BE WELL AWARE THAT ANY SINGLE INCIDENT COULD LEAD TO A MAJOR CONFRONTATION BETWEEN SYRIAN REGULARS AND THE CHRISTIAN MILITIA. BY NOT ACTING TO GET THE PALESTINIAN GUERRILLAS AWAY FROM THE BORDER ASSAD HAS PUT HIMSELF MORE AT THE MERCY OF PALESTINIAN EXTREMISTS THAN HE OBVIOUSLY FINDS COMFORTABLE. ASSAD'S DELEMMA IN LEBANON REMAINS THAT HE IS AT THE MERCY OF EXTREMISTS OF EVERY STRIPE AND, AS WE HAVE COMMENTED IN OTHER MESSAGES, THERE IS NO EVIDENCE HE HAS YET FORMULATED A STRATEGY CAPABLE OF DEALING WITH ALL ASPECTS OF THE LEBANESE CRISIS.

8. ISOLATING SADAT - BY ADOPTING A POSTURE OF COOLNESS

MIXED WITH MENACE, ASSAD HAS THUS FAR CONFIRMED HUSSEIN'S OWN RELUCTANCE TO THROW IN HIS LOT OPENLY WITH SADAT. WHILE WE DOUBT THAT CONCERN OVER SYRIAN REACTION HAS EQUALLY INTIMIDATED THE SAUDIS AND KUWAITIS, IT MAY NONETHELESS HAVE REINFORCED THE DECISION OF THEIR LEADERS TO DOWNPLAY SUPPORT FOR SADAT.

9. THE SYRIANS TALK AS IF CONFIDENT THAT SADAT WILL NOT LONG REMAIN IN POWER. WHETHER HE RESIGNS OR IS FORCED OUT OF OFFICE, SYRIANS ARGUE THAT THE EGYPTIAN PRESIDENT'S INITIATIVES HAVE NOT ONLY DIVIDED THE ARABS BUT SERVED TO MAKE THE ISRAELIS MORE INTRANSIGENT ON THE CORE ISSUE OF PALESTINIAN RIGHTS. FURTHERMORE, THE FACT THAT SADAT HAS NOT ACCEPTED A SEPARATE PEACE WITH ISRAEL HAS NOT SERIOUSLY SHAKEN THE SYRIAN CONVICTION THAT HE NONETHELESS INTENDS TO DO SO AND IS MERELY ENGAGING IN CONFIDENTIAL

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DECEPTIVE MANEUVERS TO THIS END. EVEN IF THE STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES IS AGREED UPON BETWEEN JERUSALEM AND CAIRO, WHICH THOSE CAPITALS AND OTHER PARTIES MIGHT SEE AS AN ACCEPTABLE BASIS FOR FURTHER COMPREHENSIVE NEGOTIATIONS, DAMASCUS WILL ARGUE THAT SADAT HAS MADE UNACCEPTABLE CONCESSIONS.

10. US-SYRIAN RELATIONS - SYRIA CONTINUES SHARPLY CRITICAL OF US SUPPORT FOR SADAT AND YET SENIOR OFFICIALS IN PRIVATE ACKNOWLEDGE WITHOUT ANY PARTICULAR BITTERNESS THAT LITTLE ELSE SHOULD BE EXPECTED FROM WASHINGTON WHICH ALWAYS STOOD FOR DIRECT ARAB-ISRAELI CONTACTS. THE REGIME'S SOMEWHAT SURPRISING DECISION TO PUBLICIZE ITS REJECTION OF AN AHERTON VISIT, HOWEVER, SUGGESTS THAT IT MAY NOT BE AS SELF-CONFIDENT AS IT PROTRAYS ITSELF AND BELIEVES IT CANNOT AFFORD TO "CONFUSE" THE PALESTINIANS, SYRIA'S ARAB "STEADFASTNESS" PARTNERS, AND PERHAPS ALSO THE SOVIETS. TO REFUSE EVEN TO HEAR A FIRST-HAND BRIEFING BY AHERTON IS A CHANGE FOR ASSAD WHO RECEIVED FORMER SECRETARY KISSINGER AFTER SINAI II AND SENT KHADDAM TO MEET WITH KISSINGER AGAIN IN THE FALL OF 1976. IT WOULD NOT BE SURPRISINGLY TO EXPERIENCE A COOLING IN OUR DAY-TO-DAY RELATIONS WITH THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT. SYRIANS ARE HIGHLY SENSITIZED TO WHICH RELATIONSHIPS ARE OFFICIALLY ENCOURAGED AND WHICH SHOULD BE AVOIDED. I CAN ONLY REPORT THAT MISSION-WIDE WE AS YET DETECT NO SIGNIFICANT SHIFT. UP TO NOW, IT SEEMS THAT SYRIAN OFFICIALS AND OUR PRIVATE CONTACTS ASSUME THAT THEIR GOVERNMENT STILL DESIRES TO MAINTAIN A PRODUCTIVE CONTACT WITH WASHINGTON, ALBEIT IN QUIET DIPLOMATIC CHANNELS RATHER THAN THROUGH TOP LEVEL CONTACTS.

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11. PROSPECTS FOR PEACE PROCESS - IN SUM, DAMASCUS DOES NOT ANTICIPATE HAVING SADAT AGAIN AS A PARTNER IN THE PEACE PROCESS, ALTHOUGH GIVEN THE VOLATILITY OF INTERARAB RELATIONSHIP ASSAD PRIVATELY MAY NOT EXCLUDE THAT POSSIBILITY. BUT SYRIANS ARE HIGHLY ALLERGIC TO THE IDEA OF COMING TO THE NEGOTIATING TABLE, EVEN ASSUMING A SATISFACTORY FORMULA FOR PALESTINIAN REPRESENTATION HAD BEEN REACHED, WHERE THEY WOULD FIND THEMSELVES ALONE WITH THE SOVIETS FACING OURSELVES, ISRAEL, JORDAN AND EGYPT. FOR THE NEAR FUTURE, WE ANTICIPATE DAMASCUS WILL CONTINUE TO PROFESS ALLEGIANCE TO ITS "PRINCIPLED STAND OF STADFASTNESS" IN ANTICIPATION OF SADAT'S COLLAPSE. IF AND WHEN THAT HAPPENS, IT WILL THEN REASSESS PROSPECTS OF REJOINING THE PROCESS. WE DOUBT THEY HAVE THOUGHT THROUGH WHAT POSSIBILITIES WILL EXIST SHOULD SADAT'S INITIATIVES FAIL. WE ARE CERTAIN THEY WILL NEVER ACKNOWLEDGE HOW THEIR OWN ACTIONS, WHICH THEY VIEW BASICALLY AS DEFENSIVE OF SYRIAN INTERESTS, ARE CONTRIBUTING TO A POLARIZATION OF FORCES WHICH RISKS DESTROYING ALL PROSPECTS OF ACHIEVING A DURABLE PEACE.

MURPHY

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